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Out of Poverty by Paul Polak

The book starts out with a story about Paul Polak as a 15 year old boy. He became very interested in farming and managed to convince two farmers to partner with him in starting a strawberry business. Though he managed to make a profit with minimal farming background, he soon realized that farming was extremely hard work. So, instead he went into the field of psychiatry. Throughout his career he could never get past these two questions: “what makes poor people poor?” and “what can they do about their poverty.” Polak ended up going to rural Asia and Africa to answer these questions for himself. He spent 25 years of his life in these areas speaking with and living with these people in order gain a deeper understanding of what they truly needed to get out of poverty. It always came down to the same answer; they needed (and still do) a way to make more money. The key words in that last statement is that these people needed to MAKE more money, not have it handed down to them.

Polak lays out three myths about poverty eradication:

1) That you can donate people out of poverty

2) That national economic growth will end poverty

3) That big business operating as it does now will end poverty

Instead, Polak’s solution is to focus on small-plot farmers and have them lift themselves out of poverty. In particular, he says what they need is cheap irrigation, good seeds and fertilizers, and better access to markets. The way he came to this conclusion was through his policy of “talk less, listen more.”

By listening to the people he was trying to help, he was better able to understand important factors that influence the area and come up with realistic solutions that work. Polak determined that what most of these $1 a day poor need in order to get out of poverty is someone to develop innovative and low cost tools that help them earn more money on their own terms. Once these poverty stricken people increase their income, they can afford better housing, health care for themselves and their families. Protein and other essential nutrients suddenly become affordable. And furthermore, they are able to improve their agricultural practices by buying livestock and no longer overworking the land.

Polak also talks about his well known 12 steps of practical problem solving:

Step 1: Go to where the action is

Step 2: Talk to the people that have the problem and listen to what they have to say

Step 3: Learn everything you can about the problem’s specific context.

Step 4: Think big and act big

Step 5: Think like a child

Step 6: See and do the obvious

Step 7: If somebody has already invented it, you don’t need to do so again.

Step 8: Make sure your approach has positive measurable impacts that can be brought to scale

Step 9: Design to specific cost and price targets.

Step 10: follow practical 3 year plans.

Step 11: Continue to learn from your customers.

Step 12: Stay positive: Don’t be distracted by what other people think.

Polak has many great ideas and has helped many people through his years in development. I admire the work he has done and the model he has developed for people to take ideas from. I fully agree with starting from the bottom up and getting to know the people you are trying to help before coming up with a “solution.” (Sorry if this all sounds familiar. We already covered a lot of his philosophy in class.)